Book Reviews

Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power.* New York: Basic Books, 2002. 427 pp. $30.

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One has only to turn on the television these days and see the awful grist that is offered to the public in the guise of badly written situation comedies and dramas, not to mention the proliferation of supposed news shows consisting of people shouting at each other in stage-managed entertainment on sets with pictures of the U.S. Capitol in the background. Surprisingly, one sees few historical dramas on television, unlike, for example, in England, where the British Broadcasting Corporation routinely draws on some episode in the country's history to provide well-done and generally interesting popular entertainment.

One cannot help but wonder why Max Boot did not try to write a historical drama for television when he was working on *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power.* Boot spends three-quarters of his book (nearly 300 pages) regaling the reader with stories of the courage and bravery of American heroes across the centuries battling in distant lands in difficult and trying circumstances, but almost always triumphing against evil. Anyone interested in a dramatic and breathless retelling of Stephen Decatur's battles with the Barbary pirates, or Smedly Butler's daring encounters with the Boxers in China and with South American rebels, or General John J. Pershing's dashes around Mexico in his unsuccessful attempt to catch Pancho Villa will greatly enjoy reading this book. These and other incidents that chronicle America's "small wars" experience show Boot's flair for the dramatic. As retold by Boot, in fact, these incidents probably would make for fine television drama.

But Boot's purpose in retelling these tales is decidedly not to impress the reader with the drama of the country's history. He seeks instead to demonstrate the relevance of the country's history to the modern era. Boot would have us believe that the U.S. record in "small wars" around the globe over the centuries is part of a national experience and tradition that will allow the United States to play the role of a global Robocop enforcing a Pax Americana in the new century. But Boot's argument, though interesting in itself, is built on a house of cards insofar as it involves his assertion of the relevance of the U.S. historical experience to the modern era.

As an analytic tool, the drawing of inferences from historical case studies should be a rigorous and painstaking process based on time-consuming research. Each case study must be laboriously dissected to determine what actually happened and why in a particular historical circumstance. Once this part of the equation has been com-

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pleted, the process of drawing inferences can credibly begin. Unfortunately, Boot did none of the critical research, and thus the inferences he draws from his uncritical rendition of history are essentially meaningless. All that emerges from the major part of his book is a potted history of U.S. involvement in small wars. This makes most of the book essentially unreviewable, except that Boot generally acknowledges in a backhanded way that most of America's episodic interventions around the world prior to World War II had a negligible impact—a point that does not in fact support his main argument. Sadly, Boot misses an opportunity for a genuinely interesting discussion of why the wars of the modern era are fundamentally different from those of the last century. A far more interesting example of the use of historical analogies to analyze the modern era is Robert Kaplan's wistful *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos* (New York: Random House, 2002).

The real point of Boot's book is delivered in the remaining 100 pages, which treat the reader to a politically motivated and inspired argument about why civilian leaders should disregard the advice of professional military naysayers (who have often been "wrong") when making decisions about when to use force as an instrument of foreign policy. Boot's argument would probably have been more effective if it had been boiled down to a 5,000-word article in *Foreign Affairs* (published by the Council on Foreign Relations, where Boot is now a senior fellow) or an editorial in the *The Wall Street Journal* (Boot's former employer). Boot's shopworn variation on the theme goes basically like this: The U.S. military has forgotten all the lessons it learned in the country's small wars (lessons enshrined in the "Small Wars Manual" of the U.S. Marine Corps), and it blundered about in Vietnam and fought the wrong war against the wrong enemy while putting up with political interference—an experience that left it institutionally scarred and forever reluctant to engage in any conflict short of all-out war.

The result was the so-called Weinberger/Powell doctrine, a doctrine first formulated in the mid-1980s by Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and then refined at the beginning of the 1990s by the then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell. Boot correctly notes that the prescriptions for the use of force under this doctrine were so narrowly defined that it would almost never be used unless the country came under direct attack or the Soviet Army came through the Fulda Gap. The cautiousness of this doctrine is encapsulated, for Boot, in the 1991 Gulf War when General Powell's reluctance to fight the war, and to prosecute it fully once it started, allowed the Iraqi army to escape with only minor damage and spurred George H. W. Bush not to march on Baghdad. To avoid this regrettable outcome again, the task for political leaders in the modern era, according to Boot, is to reassert civilian control over the military and override the military's reluctance to use force. The debate in 2002 and early 2003 over whether to use force against Iraq neatly captured all these points, with the reported reluctance of the uniformed military (including some retired generals) to invade Iraq contrasting with a more hawkish civilian leadership, especially in the Department of Defense.

The more interesting issue implicitly raised but not explicitly discussed in *The Savage Wars of Peace* is the fundamental differences between the "small wars" of the

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and those that followed World War II. The fact is that the wars of the second half of the twentieth century involved new and more sophisticated foes. Ho Chi Minh and Mao Zedong, for example, were Communist revolutionaries who were fundamentally different from the enemies confronting the United States in the nineteenth century. Their commitment to their respective struggles was unshakable, their method of organizing and prosecuting war was different, and they were prepared to pay essentially any cost to secure victory. Thus, it is not really so surprising that U.S. military and political institutions had difficulty adapting to these new adversaries. Ho Chi Minh and Mao in some senses provided a bridge from the post-colonial era to the new warrior caste and rogue states that are now identified as the primary threats to the United States in the international system.

Osama bin Laden embodies the warrior caste of the new century. He is another revolutionary leader who is waging an asymmetric war using new methods and an innovative organizational structure that draw on the latest private-sector thinking about how to maximize the concepts of effective mass marketing, low overhead, operational efficiency, and organizational effectiveness. The al Qaeda terrorist network is but the latest—and perhaps most pernicious—example of the self-sustaining transnational terrorist organizations that have sprung up over the past twenty-five years. These organizations simultaneously seek to make money, inflict casualties, and generally destabilize whatever part of the international environment they happen to inhabit. Combating these organizations is a central foreign policy challenge of the new century that will, on occasion, require the use of force in addition to other more traditional law enforcement techniques.

So how is the country to deal with this threat? Certainly the results of U.S. attempts to disrupt al Qaeda's base of operations in Afghanistan are encouraging and suggest, contrary to Boot's characterizations, that the American military may be better at waging "small wars" in this era than is generally believed. Images of American soldiers on horseback calling in air strikes via mobile satellite communications using Global Positioning System coordinates hardly suggest institutions that are unable to adapt to a particular threat environment. The decision to go after al Qaeda undermines another of Boot's assertions—that the so-called Powell doctrine continues to be an operative set of assumptions. The terrorist attacks of September 2001 prompted the country to respond decisively and quickly, with little concern over exit strategies or other considerations enumerated in the doctrine. The country received a grave blow from the attacks and went after the perpetrators in short order.

The role of force as an instrument of foreign policy in today's chaotic international environment is a fascinating topic. The United States is entering a new era with unprecedented global dominance, and policymakers are still searching for a set of assumptions to guide their decision-making on the role of force. We can be sure of one thing: the future will not be like the past, and we are sailing into uncharted waters in a new and unpredictable global environment that will require new frames of reference.